

Uke N Sing: Simple Strumming Techniques

<http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/Docs/Strumming.pdf>

Strumming Position

On most ukuleles (Soprano, Tenor, Concert) your strumming fingers will fall naturally over the last fret on the fingerboard, or nearby. This is the “sweet” spot ie. best strumming spot.

Which fingers (or thumb)?

Although there are various methods of strumming including both, forefinger, thumb or both, the standard method (and one which leads to greater flexibility later on) is strumming with your forefinger: Your forefinger does both the down and up stroke. It should be bent at right angles at your first knuckle so your fingertip is at right angles to the strings. Your other fingers are relaxed in their natural curve and your wrist should be straight. You strike the strings with either side of your fingertip.

Some things to note

Strum with a rolling motion of the wrist and leave the forearm relaxed. **Everything** should be relaxed including the fingers you are strumming with.

Evenness of **rhythm** and **volume** (make sure the upstroke is as strong as the downstroke) are really important. As you progress with strumming you will find that we can vary rhythm and volume to good effect. However, these variations can only come about from a solid base of even strumming, so really work on that.

Learning strumming, like learning most instruments, is an exercise in muscle control. It might seem tricky at first, but practice is your friend – the muscles will get the idea in time. **And remember to keep your hand and arm relaxed**

Simple Rhythms

Even Strum. The simplest rhythm is an even Down Up Down Up, affectionately known as Jimi

Count 1 and 2 and 1 and 2 and. OR 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2 or Ji-mi Ji- mi Ji- mi
 ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

Listen to an example (playing the chord of C) here: <http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/StrumSimple.mp3>
Note that whereas the rhythm is steady, every 2nd down stroke is emphasized. This gives you a “marker” to help you to keep the rhythm steady, and also it is very common in music that the first note of a bar is emphasized. **Try doing this strum initially totally steady with no emphasis, and then you can play with the emphasis.**

You can try this strum with “Kingston Town” in your Songs in the Key of G sheet.

Swing Strum. (affectionately know as Maaartin). More common, and has more of a lift. It still alternates Down Up, but the Down stroke gets **twice as long** as the up stroke. Here the count is

Count 1 and a 2 and a 1 and a 2 and a. OR 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3
 ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

Listen to an example (playing the chord of G) here: <http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/StrumSwing.mp3>

Try this strum to “Rock My Soul” in the Songs in C sheet.

Variations – a bit of spice!

You can make these basic strums more interesting by adding some simple variations.

A huge difference can be made to the basic 2 strums by **emphasizing** some strokes.

For the **Swing Strum (Maartin)** it looks like this:

1 and a **2** and a 1 and a **2** and a. OR 1 2 3 **1** 2 3 1 2 3 **1** 2 3
↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

Listen to an example here: <http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/MartinEmphasised.mp3>.

Try this strum to Rock My Soul or Wimaway. Makes a huge difference!.

Looking at the Jimi strum, there is a lovely variation we can do to bring a calypso feel to the strum. There are many variations of this . In the one below, you start with a Jimi (1 2 1 2) strum counted in groups of 8 strokes (4 down, 4 up). The variation is to emphasize stroke 1 (on) and stroke 4 (up). It can be represented as below:

1 and 2 **and** 1 and 2 and. OR 1 2 1 **2** 1 2 1 2 OR 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

Listen to an example here: <http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/StrumCalypso.mp3>.

Common fault: It is very easy to make stroke 5 (the downstroke after the strong upstroke) strong. That totally changes the nature of the strum. Be careful with this. Do it slowly and make sure stroke 5 is soft. I find it useful to count out loud **ONE** two three **FOUR** five six seven eight

Try this with “Jamaican Farewell”. You should hear the calypso feel emerging. Experiment, play with it, get into the feel of the song!

Reintroducing the thumb

Interest can be added by introducing a thumb downstroke that “takes its time” ie. you hear each string individually. The speed and evenness of the stroke will take some mastering but a good way to get good control over your thumb is by curling your fingers round the bottom corner of the uke, near the neck. This allows you to control the speed at which you thumb through the strings.

The Thumb strum

All strokes are played with the forefinger except for the thumb stroke which is a down stroke. The strum sequence is

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Down		Thumb	Up		Up	Down	Up

Note that the 2nd and 5th strokes are **there in the rhythm** but are silent

You can listen to an example at <http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/StrumThumb.mp3>. It starts with the G chord and then goes into “Kingston Town” (G/C/D7) which suits the strum.

The previous thumb strum is based on the Jimi strum. Here are a couple based on the Maaartin strum:

Thumb up down up strum

Here, we play a standard Maaartin strum:

1 and a 2 and a 1 and a 2 and a.
↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

But we replace every “1” with a thumb stroke:

Thumb and a 2 and a Thumb and a 2 and a. or Thumb up down up thumb up down up
↓ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↑

You will notice that you naturally tend to play the finger strokes with your nail on the downstroke and pad on the upstroke (unlike normal Maartin where it is side on).

Here’s an example. I use the C chord, it develops into C F C G7 and then Wimaway (same chords):
<http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/MaartenThumb.mp3>

Thumb up down up strum with variation

This is simply the above strum where you miss out every 2nd thumb stroke:

Thumb up down up ----- up down up

It’s a simple change but it gives the strum a quite different feel. It helps when practicing it to keep the “up down up” count in your head: Thumb up down up none up down up and keep the swing Maartin rhythm in your head also.

Here’s an example. I use the C chord, and then we move into Midnight Special (D, G, A7):
<http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/MaartenThumb2.mp3>

The 1 4 7 strum

And finally (for now) something rather different. We’re back to Jimi as a basis. If you count in lots of 8:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

This strum keeps the Jimi even rhythm and emphasizes strokes 1, 4 and 7:

1 2 3 4 5 6 **7** 8
↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑

It’s interesting that it is very similar to the 1 4 strum (just one extra stroke emphasized), but it has a totally different feel.

Here’s an example. I use the D chord, and then we move into Brain Damage (appropriate?):
<http://www.singforjoy.org.nz/ukemp3/147.mp3>